The Bride

MurderOfCrowss

Star Wars - All Media Types / Star Wars Sequel Trilogy Complete

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Summary

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Description:

Rey finds out that there’s more truth than lore in the ghost that haunts the Ren estate.

Chapter 1

October 31st 1822

"Why have you summoned me?"

The old woman stood in the hallway, her sightless eyes staring straight at Ben, her face sallow like a half-melted candle. She was accompanied by two large men. They stood at her elbows, their faces mostly covered in cloth, their eyes mistrustful.

Kylo knew if she gave the word, the two men would kill him. He didn't care.

"I'm ready to pay the blood price," he said.

The woman's hands came out of her robe and she touched a necklace made of bone that hung around a brown shapeless shift. "Fool! You do not know what you ask."

"Your family wants the northern land on the edge of town." He pulled a deed out of his pocket. "It's yours."

The two men looked surprised and glanced at the old woman for her response. Her lips were almost non-existent, and there were no teeth when she smiled. "That land is ours. *You* do not give it to us."

"Now you can legally keep it," he said, holding the deed out to her. "The state can no longer evict you or force you and your families to move."

She didn't take it, but from her pocket she withdrew a small bag tied with a black ribbon. When she turned it upside down and dumped it on the floor, dirt, mice bones, and black stones fell out.

"You want your true love?" Her voice reminded him of creaky boards and rotting timber. "You would resort to this dark magic to find her?"

"Yes," he said, his anger still raw. "She has to return to me."

"Where is the wedding ring?"

He pulled it out of his pocket. It had been left on the floor of the church, where he had waited so long for his bride who would never come. Kira—a girl of no station, whom he had doted on regardless—had had the audacity to leave him at the altar.

"You are a cold man," the croon said, taking the ring and the deed. "I have heard you have no heart, no soul, and care only for your possessions."

"She is mine," he hissed. "That is all you need to know."

"Very well." The woman dropped the ring on the ground. "What you have asked for you shall be given, but the price is high."

"I'll give you anything you want, old woman."

“I want nothing more,” she said, her hands moving. “But you shall stay in the walls of this home until your true love returns, surrounded by all that is yours. When she comes, you will have her put this ring on. If you can convince her without treachery to stay until the sun rises, she will be yours forever.”

“When will Kira come?” he demanded, not caring that the room was beginning to darken. The lanterns flickered and went out until there was nothing but the moon through the windows to illuminate them. It didn’t make him fearful—he knew she was using terrible, dark magic. If it was the devil she bargained with, so be it.

“Kira is across the sea,” the woman said. “You will never see her again.”

“No.” His fists clenched and he felt something cold seep in him. “You have deceived me.”

“I have not,” she replied, and he felt her words thrum to his core. “Kylo Ren, you have asked for your true love to return and that is what I shall give you. You are cursed to wait until she returns.”

He lunged at her to stop the curse from taking, but the darkness wrapped him up and took him.

October 31st 2022

The sun was starting to set, which meant that all the trick-or-treaters were going to be coming out in droves soon. Rey, while no longer a child at nineteen, was walking amongst them.

She had found a costume at a thrift store for only ten dollars—an antique wedding dress, hidden under scarves and costume jewelry at the bottom of a trunk. The store clerk had barely given it a second glance before issuing the price.

She had a feeling it belonged to someone’s grandmother. The material was faded, adorned with lace and pearl buttons. It was conservative in style and showed as little skin as possible. The design fit her perfectly, accentuated her hips, and even made her look like she had a chest. Not bad, she had to admit. To accessorize, she held a bouquet of fake roses and clipped a veil to the back of her hair.

The only thing that didn’t go with her costume was her tennis shoes, but that was because it was a long walk to the sorority’s Halloween party and she didn’t want her feet to ache.

To avoid most of the trick-or-treaters, Rey decided to take a shortcut past the Ren estate. It cut ten minutes off her walk, plus she liked the old mansion with its black iron gates and sordid history. It had been one of the only constants in her hectic life.

Normally the estate was completely empty, but today she saw three young boys rattling the front gate: Batman, Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk, apparently trying to break in. They hadn’t yet noticed her.

“I heard Kylo buried his money somewhere on the property,” Spider-Man said, trying to find a foothold to climb the gate.

“I wouldn’t go looking for it.” The Incredible Hulk crossed his arms. “He’s searching for his bride tonight.”

“That’s bullshit,” Batman said, kicking the gate. “There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

Spider-Man shook his head. “My older sister said she saw him last year. He tried to get her to open the gate and come inside… And Mrs. Marshall, my next door neighbor, said the same thing happened to her when she was in high school.”

“This place sucks. There’s nothing here but weeds and rocks. C’mon guys, let’s go back. We’re going to miss the candy.”

It was then that the boys noticed her, standing there in the old wedding gown. Their eyes widened and she couldn’t help but scare them a little bit. She loved acting—theater was her major, after all. She pitched her voice low and said, “How dare you trespass on my home. I’ll drag you inside, to live with me forever….”

Batman gave a very un-Batman like shriek.

It was fun seeing the three mini-heroes scream, grab their bikes, and take off down the road at an impressive speed. She hoped she became an urban legend, told around campfires for generations.

Grinning, she let her hand drag along the iron gate, gazing at the Victorian-style mansion that hadn’t been touched by time. It was maintained by the state, having long ago been taken over as a historical site and tourist attraction during summer months.

A breeze came up, soft at first, and then a full gust; dust and dead leaves danced around her in a swirl. When it settled, there was a subtle chill in the air. She rubbed her arms, feeling goosebumps rise through the thin material of her dress.

Suddenly, the front gate swung open.

She stared at it. And stared.

It was a coincidence.

That was what her brain said… but something told her, coincidence or not, she needed to leave. Now. Her heart thumped in her chest as she hitched her dress and ran. Maybe the boys were still somewhere down the street. Maybe she could scare them again.

Chapter 2

Rey heard the party before she saw it. Cars lined the street, some parked not-so-politely in other people's drive. She imagined a few would probably get towed. It was warm enough outside that some of the party goers were hanging out on the lawn, and one person was actively puking in a bush.

She made her way to the front door, stepping past a couple making out on the steps. Inside the music was even louder, making her wish she had brought ear plugs. Red solo cups were everywhere: on the coffee table, in people's hands, on the floor. She couldn't find the source, but some girl dressed as Britney Spears handed her one and remarked on her costume. Or so Rey thought. She couldn't hear her.

As she started drinking the cold beer, she searched for the one face that had made her promise to come. Rey wasn't much of a party girl; she had a shift at Denny's at eight am and they would dock her pay if she was fifteen minutes late.

There were lots of girls dressed as angels and devils in short skirts, a few princesses, some 'sexy' bunnies, and one girl who, for some reason, had decided to be a giant dice. The guys were mostly action heroes, though you could tell who the couples were as they had matching costumes.

Rey found her best friend, Rose, in the outside veranda. Which was good, because the heat inside was getting to her and she'd already finished her beer. It was no surprise to see a crowd of men close by. Rose was dressed as Xena… or some warrior, who had a sword and a leather skirt.

When she saw Rey, she pointed the sword at her. "Oh my God! You really fucking did it!"

One of the guys next to her, a tall red head, gave Rey a once over. He was dressed in what looked like a simple white sheet that was wrapped around like a toga. "Are you the bride?"

"Armie," Rose gave him an elbow. 'Who else would she be?' He looked at Rose a bit sheepish and shrugged, making her friend roll her eyes. "Get us a drink. We have to keep her here until dawn so she escapes the curse."

Armie obeyed, and one of the guys next to him started to whistle at Rey.

"Don't be a prick," Armie snapped at the guy.

The other guys looked at Rey but didn't further the cat calls, which was good because she had no interest in helping them get laid. Rose looked happy though, her eyes following Armie with rare interest as he left; her best friend was almost as picky as she was with men.

"You look amazing," Rey said, getting close enough to her friend that she didn't have to shout. "Is everyone already drunk? Didn't this thing start an hour ago?"

"We're not drunk yet," Rose smirked. "And that's something we need to remedy. Do you like dark and mysterious, or nerdy with glasses, or…" Rose looked her up and down. "Both?"

“I’m not here for that!” Rey protested.

“You’re a bride… in white… I know this is my psychology major talking, but your costume has some undercurrents of that *card* you’re not giving up. You know that you don’t have to get married to do *that*, right?”

“I know,” Rey blushed. “Now quiet down a bit! I don’t want *everyone* to know that… detail of my life.”

Armie was suddenly there with two red cups in his hand. He held one out to Rey, which she accepted. Rose took hers and said to Armie, “Make sure all your friends vote for the bride, got it?”

“No, no…” Rey held her hands up.

“There’s a five hundred dollar cash prize,” Rose said, making Rey shut up. “Which you can use to fund a new wardrobe.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

By midnight, Rey had won the contest, been asked out by ten different versions of Batman (plus one Wonder Woman), and had drunk more than she had in a long while. When she told Rose, who was sitting in Armie’s lap, that she was ready to go home, Armie leaned his head back and yelled at a guy named Alex to drive her. He had sandy blond hair that was slicked back, and he was wearing a vampire costume with a long black cape.

“He’s the DD,” Armie said. “Don’t worry, he’s a nice guy.”

That *nice guy* cut the engines in front of the Ren estate on their drive home. Rey was drunk, but still sober enough to know what that meant. “Hey,” she said, giving him a fake smile. “Could you please take me home?”

Alex showed her his fangs. He had a narrow face, so when he opened his mouth, it mostly made her think of Count Chocula. “Don’t you want to see what’s in my bat cave?”

“No.” She kept her voice stern. “I want you to take me home.”

He put a hand on her thigh, which she immediately shoved off. When he murmured something about how pretty she looked, she scooted as far from him as possible. But then he leaned over and tried to kiss her, which was the final straw. She slapped him. The fake teeth popped out of his mouth, and it would have been comical if his face hadn’t transformed into pure rage.

“The fuck you think you are,” he snarled, grabbing her by the wrist.

“Let go. Now.”

“You fucking slut, you think you’re better than me?” His fingers dug into her skin, bruising her. “We’ll see about that.”

Rey’s fight or flight instincts kicked in; she bawled her fists and hit him in the throat with everything she had, taking satisfaction when he sputtered and coughed in pain. Without waiting to see if he was okay, she opened the door and spilled out of the car. He tried to grab the back of her veil to stop her, but the clip easily came loose and she was free once again.

He swore and hopped out of the car. The street was deserted. No witnesses, no one to hear her screams. Even if someone could hear her, they would likely brush it off as a Halloween prank. Though her dress limited her movements, she ran in the hopes of finding somewhere to hide or maybe even a weapon.

It was then that she saw the open gate.

What had scared her earlier now felt like her only escape. There were large trees and places to hide on the estate—at least more than a wide open street would give her. She glanced behind to see Alex's cape had gotten caught in the car door.

A small head start.

"Bitch!" he screamed, his face twisted in anger.

Once she ran across the threshold of the estate, she almost stopped in surprise. The lawn was lit up and so was the mansion. Tea light candles lined the entryway path, and the house lights must have just flickered on because she was sure she would have seen them before.

But she didn't have time to analyze why they were there. They only meant one thing: someone was home.

"Help!" she screamed. Maybe there was a groundskeeper nearby, or maybe the building had been rented out by someone.

Though she was running as fast as she could, Alex was gaining on her. Even before his shadow eclipsed her own, she knew she wouldn't make it. He wasn't a big man, but he was bigger than her, and the force of his body knocking into her own propelled her into the grassy awning.

"You wanted me to chase you here." He turned her over, straddling her as she tried to fight. "That's right, you like a little role play. Want to be the runaway bride."

That was probably the story he'd tell the police in the morning, after he raped her. She tried to claw his eyes, but he caught her wrist. "Not this time, bitch."

He was on her and then he wasn't. It happened so fast that she couldn't understand where he'd gone or what had happened. Then he was screaming and kicking his legs in the air as an impossibly tall man held him up by the neck.

The man had full black hair that brushed against his shoulders, and he was wearing a three-piece suit. She could see him well enough from the waning moon to see that he was handsome, with dark eyes and full lips that were pulled back in a ferocious scowl.

"How dare you treat a woman with such indignity," he spat. He shook Alex, who was turning red from lack of oxygen, and began to drag him toward the gate. "I'll have you horse-whipped."

While he took her would-be attacker outside the gate, she worked on getting herself up. She noticed that her dress was covered in dirt and grass stains, and there was a jagged tear in the hem. She'd have to throw the whole thing out… though after tonight, she didn't want to wear it again anyway.

The tall man returned, closing the distance between them quickly with his long strides. Rey idly wondered what he did with Alex, but truthfully she didn't care enough to ask. Maybe Alex ran away, or maybe this other man had roughed him up a bit. It would serve him right. Rey was going to make sure Rose knew what kind of friends her date had.

"Are you alright?" the man asked, looking her up and down in concern.

"Thanks to you, yes," Rey said, giving him a grateful smile. "I didn't know anyone lived here."

He looked above her at the manor. "I've lived here my whole life, but I have not been social or allowed visitors. I believe high society no longer interests me as it once did."

High society? He talked like he was from a different time. Dressed like it, too, with his stiff three-piece suit. She couldn't help but admire the pains he'd taken to secure such an authentic Halloween costume.

"Are you the groom?" she smirked. "Waiting on your bride?"

She expected him to laugh or at least smile, but he didn't. His jaw tightened and his lips pressed into a hard line. Rey awkwardly chuckled and took her iPhone out of her small bag; however, when she tried to turn it on, the screen stayed black. Dead. Or maybe it had broken somehow during the scuffle with Alex. Sighing, she put it away and looked at the stranger.

"Could I use your phone and call for a taxi?"

"Please come inside," he said, offering her his arm. "I have no female to chaperone us, but I feel there is no other option as your safety will be compromised further if I leave you alone."

She took his arm, looking once again toward the open gate. "Is Alex… okay?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well…"

"He would have hurt you," the man said, walking toward the manor.

"But…" She tried to say more, but they were already climbing the steps to the house.

He pulled a silver key from his pocket and pushed it into an ornate lock on the front door. She felt her skin prickle, cold creeping up her spine. The temperature felt like it had dropped ten degrees. He gave her a sidelong glance and she realized she didn't even know this man's name.

She was about to ask when he opened the heavy wooden doors.

A wave of cool air hit her. Rey's heart lept in her throat and she staggered back a step when the doors opened with a pronounced creak to reveal a large foyer. There was a fountain in the center and plush red carpets covering the two sets of stairs leading to the floor above.

"This way," the man said, his hand on her back. While it wasn't quite a shove, he was very firm in leading her forward. "There's nothing to be afraid of… my home is yours now."

She glanced over her shoulder in time to see the doors close seamlessly behind her. The overhead chandeliers and wall lamps were all set to a dim glow, casting much of the house in shadow. It made sense as the state probably didn't want huge electricity bills in the off season, but still—it gave the place a haunted vibe.

Rey felt the need to explain herself for the whole Alex situation. "I didn't know him, by the way… the guy who attacked me. I don't normally let guys like him near me. He was only supposed to drive me home from a party."

"A driver that took liberties. I don't feel bad for boxing his ears; he'll wake soon enough and be better for it."

"You knocked him out?"

"The man is lucky that was all I did," he spat. Rey shrank from his fury. He noticed and his features softened. "Forgive me, Miss…"

"Rey." He seemed to expect more, so she added, "Johnson."

"Kylo Ren." He held a hand out and she stifled a laugh. Kylo Ren. Of course.

"I see." She went to shake his offered hand, but he instead lightly planted a kiss over her knuckles. He played the part so naturally, she felt oddly flattered by the act.

"Have you been here before?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I've lived here all my life, but I never did one of the tours."

"Would you like one now?"

"That would be nice… but I should probably call a cab."

"It won't take long."

He once again offered her his arm. She felt a stir of irritation, but she quickly shoved it down. He had saved her—the least she could do was allow him to show her the house. He was probably lonely without all the tourists around.

"I have to work in the morning, but I guess…"

That was all the invitation he needed, and he escorted her further inside. Paintings hung in gold frames in all the rooms, some as big as the wall. Kylo passed most of them, but every once in a while he would stop and tell her a little about a specific one. She had no idea such a gallery existed. Rose had told her once that the place was run down and the state was thinking of closing it rather than putting the money in for a remodel.

Now that her adrenaline was beginning to wear off, the alcohol she had consumed earlier made her feel chatty. "I heard a few families tried to buy it after the owner went missing," she said after they stopped at a painting of a little girl in a field of flowers. "They all moved out after a year. It really helped the ghost story and lore."

"Yes," Kylo absently replied. 'The spells that bind this house do not allow permanent guests. I am only permitted to cross the veil one night every year, to search the grounds for my bride.' His eyes met hers. "For two hundred years, my existence has been that of one

night. I should be thankful for it; if I had to stay here alone for two hundred years, I may have gone quite insane by now."

"What a sad ghost you are," Rey said. Kylo played the part very well. He even looked grief stricken. The man had talent. "And here I am. You must be very happy to have finally found me."

He said nothing, his eyes traveling over her before meeting her gaze. The intensity in them made her feel self conscious. As if the little tease had been an actual offer. Then it was gone.

"You are here," he agreed. "I know you do not understand… but perhaps that is better."

Her brain was a bit fuzzy and she wondered if he was telling some sort of inside joke. She really needed to get home. Her shift at Denny's was in a few hours. "Um, could I use your phone to call a cab?"

"Come with me," he sighed. Her tiredness was catching up with her. She rubbed her eyes, and he offered her his elbow again.

"I wish all men were gentlemen," she said. "You're very good at this. And you're very cute. You should stop by tomorrow where I work. Coffee… pancakes, whatever. On me."

"You are a serving girl? My betrothed also worked in an ale house. I saw her and loved her despite her poor social standing."

Rey gave an unlady-like snort. "Wouldn't she be too uncivilized for you?"

"At first, she talked worse than you. I gave her time—two years so she could learn how to write and talk with correct punctuation and articulation. Good tutors to make up for her lack of education."

"Wow… gifts any woman would want," she said dryly.

He didn't seem to notice her mocking tone. "I pampered her. Do not think I was completely unkind. I gave her gowns from France and jewels. Little birds, ribbons, and sweet cakes. Every day I would visit her and see how she was doing and give her assurance of my affection."

"And did the lady love you back?"

He frowned. "I assured her often she would feel the same as I did when she came to know me more. Up until our wedding day, I thought she had."

Rey was not impressed. "Doesn't sound like love… sounds like obsession. Maybe she ran off so she could be free. Who wants to be treated like an object?"

A flicker of annoyance flashed across his face before he gave her a rueful smile. He didn't respond and instead led her into a cozy den with a cream colored couch and a fire blazing in a hearth. Like the rest of the house, art hung on the walls. There was also a grand piano in the corner, gold candlesticks and crystal tumblers on the foot table, and a dark bottle of wine. She couldn't believe the extravagance.

Kylo went over to the polished table and uncorked the wine, pouring two glasses. "It's a good vintage. You won't have had better."

“I shouldn’t. I’m just starting to sober.” Rey waved a hand, but he brought her a glass anyway.

“It’s from Italy. Please take it and wait for me on the couch. There is a phone—a most peculiar invention—in the bedroom. I’ve heard it ring and seen a man talk on it once.” He shook his head as if baffled. “In my day, people sent their cards to my butler and scheduled appointments. Even my mother… God rest her soul.”

The man was a marvel. She was as irritated as she was impressed. He was probably a fellow drama student who was practicing method acting, and if so, was nailing it beautifully.

“If you show me to the phone, I can call,” Rey offered.

“There’s only one, and it’s in the master bedroom; prudence dictates I should not allow you in. I would not want any misunderstanding. We are alone as is, which is scandalous enough.”

Rey shrugged. Maybe he wasn’t allowed to let guests wander in certain areas. “Just tell the driver I need to go back to the college dorms.”

“You’re a serving girl and educated?”

“Yeah, listen, I’m really tired. Could we—”

“Yes. Please have a seat and enjoy the wine. I will be back shortly.”

Kylo left her, so she took a timid sip of the wine and found it sweet with a hint of spice. She didn’t know much about wine, but she figured this was beyond what a person could get at a grocery store. She took another sip, deciding it would be a waste to not drink it.

She was half way through her cup when he returned. “I apologize—the contraption is installed in the master bedroom but it appears I am unable to call out. I…” He grimaced, his jaw snapping shut, his fists clenching as if it pained him to talk. “I have little knowledge of such things, but it makes an awful beeping sound and will not work.”

He seemed sincere and embarrassed. Bad luck seemed to be following her today like a shadow. “Well I can walk… I walked here.” She tried to stand and felt a wave of dizziness. He was beside her in an instant to steady her.

“You are in no state to do so. I would escort you, but I cannot leave the grounds; you were lucky the attack happened on the lawn.”

Rey sat down and already felt better. He stopped touching her the moment she was back in her seat, sitting a distance away from her on the couch. She slipped her tennis shoes off and saw his eyes linger on her ankles before looking away quickly.

She laughed. “The Victorians put so much into etiquette. Showing an ankle was as wanton as a public sex act.”

He seemed at a loss for words and then looked down at his hands. “I have reconciled myself to your era. I know women are liberated and enjoy independence. Forgive me if I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

She gave him a knowing smile as he continued to play his role. At least he wouldn't try to make a move—Victorians were supposed to be all prim and proper. She tucked her feet under her, getting more comfortable on the couch. If he wouldn't mind a stranger sleeping a few hours on his couch, maybe she could walk home at first light, once she sobered up a bit.

"You must really love this job," she said, taking back the glass of wine when he handed it to her. "You're pretty good at it. The voice and the costume and everything… Do you never break character? I've only heard of people doing that, but I've never seen it."

He studied her for a moment like he was trying to figure out how to respond, waging a war with himself over it. Eventually, he rose and refilled his glass of wine. When he returned to the couch, he changed the topic altogether. "You look young. Are you of legal age?"

"I'm nineteen." She looked at her glass and frowned. "God, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking about the wine. I won't drink anymore, and I won't tell your employer you gave it to me." She started to set her glass down, but he shook his head.

"I'm not worried—and you are not a child. Kira was nineteen too. You look so like her. A sister, if not a twin."

She decided to play along to get some extra acting practice. "Do you want me to pretend to be Kira? I'm not good at speaking proper English but I can try."

"I can give you lessons," he said with a smile. "Your speech is not as bad as hers. You will pick it up faster, though your slouch will be harder to correct. A board tied to your back should help."

"Sounds miserable," Rey mumbled, sinking even more into the couch. "I'd be a poor student. You'd have to whip me a lot… or is it caning? I can't remember what the Victorians liked. They were pretty freaky for all their pretend prudishness."

He gave her an affronted huff. "There's nothing sinful about a good belting on Sunday after prayer, if the confession is less than genuine. You do not seem that wicked to need one. Kira only needed the cane once, and I felt guilt all night for having to use it. She had no father to discipline her during her earlier years, so she had developed a sharp tongue that needed correcting. I took no pleasure in it."

Rey giggled. "You can say that with a straight face? I'm an actress too—well, trying to be one. You have to give me some tips when you decide to break character. My instructor told me that I look like someone is controlling my body with marionette strings when I get on stage. But he says I have potential; I even have a full-ride scholarship based on an essay I wrote."

"You are trying to become an actress?" he asked in a horrified whisper.

She was confused until she remembered that being an actress used to be one of the most scandalous professions. A daughter in theater was something a family hid like a bastard child.

She nodded. "I'm hoping for Broadway. Not sure I have what Hollywood wants."

"Has a man… known you? Is that why you would… debase yourself?" He swallowed. "Never mind. Perhaps we are both sinners tonight, and this will save you."

Rey blinked. Wow. He was super deep in character. She took another sip of wine, trying to figure out if she could keep the giggles at bay and play out a scene with him. It would be kind of fun. She schooled her expression to match his own.

"I have been as good as a saint. A few chaste kisses and one or two not so chaste. Nay—" She paused. Too far back in time. "Good sir, you insult me if you think I have given away my virtue outside the sanctity of marriage."

For a minute, she thought he would break character. He was regarding her as if she'd sprouted another head. The fire crackled and a long beat passed before he settled into something contemplative. "Kira will never return… Is it my duty to rescue you from such a wicked life and make you an honest woman?"

She tried not to roll her eyes. Misogyny was such an integral part of that time. "I've no mind to marry," she reminded him. Then, too tired to keep up the charade, she broke character. "I'm tired. Would you mind if I laid down and got a few hours of sleep?"

"You would stay here of your own free will?"

"Yep." She took the last sip of wine. "You've got your bride for the night."

A sad smile touched his lips. "I want you to know my anger burned out long ago. I have had time to reflect. I'm not the same man who evoked the blood curse. Would you forgive me for not seeing your unhappiness before? And would you wear my ring tonight?"

He pulled from his pocket a simple gold band. She looked at it, the flames reflecting in the gold, making it seem to glow in his palm. This was the part of the story where she was supposed to run away. But Rey worked a double shift tomorrow and she was in desperate need of sleep. Besides, Kylo seemed harmless enough.

Unlike Alex. Her night could have been a nightmare, but Kylo had saved her. Maybe he would even break character in the morning and tell her his real name.

So, she took the ring and slipped it on her finger. Kylo let out a little gasp as it fit perfectly.

"And they lived happily ever after," she grinned. "Even if it was such a horrible time to be a woman. I'll probably get consumption or die in childbirth."

His expression was unreadable. "Sleep now, my love. Dawn will be here soon and I do not know if we shall greet it as flesh and blood or ghosts." He was close to her and she decided to do something reckless. Before she could think if it was a bad idea or not, she pressed her lips to his. He stilled for a second, then wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close.

His lips started to become cold until they were like stone. Then, even worse, she felt all the warmth leaving her body. She pushed Kylo away. "What's wrong with you?"

"Dawn is close. I can feel it as I always do."

He reached for her, but she knocked his hands away and stood up. He grasped the hem of her dress and fell to one knee.

"Oh my love, after all this time. It was too much to hope, even with you walking beside me. The curse does not allow me to lie or force you to accept my proposal. I cannot even stop you if you leave—but you have finally come back."

“Stop the act,” Rey hissed, scared. “Knock it off right now. It’s not funny. I don’t care if you’re some method actor. Stop whatever this is.”

She stumbled toward the door and he staggered up, his face beseeching her. “Don’t be frightened. Please, don’t run from me again Kira.”

“I’m not Kira,” Rey said. But he was looking at her with eyes full of hope and she realized he had to be insane. Had she really jumped from the pot into the fire? Rushing over to the hearth, he followed, but she had the poker in hand before he could reach her. She held it like a sword, brandishing the glowing tip. “Get away or I’ll hurt you.”

He sighed and grabbed the glowing end of the poker, making her heart skip a beat. The pain should have been unbearable, but he didn’t so much as flinch. He gripped it for a long second.

“I’m no actor,” he said, letting go of the poker and showing her his unburnt palm. She stared at him dumbly. “Two hundred nights… countless attempts to flatter and woo a woman from my prison to enter the estate, only for the curse to catch me and draw me back.”

“I don’t know what you are,” Rey said, glancing toward the door, “But I’m not going to find out.”

“It’s too late…” he moved to embrace her and on instinct, she used the poker like a spear, puncturing it through his stomach. He stared at it and then her. No blood. It simply made him look like a human skewer.

She screamed and then the floor rushed up.

When Rey awoke she was alone and back on the couch, covered by a soft blanket. The fire was out and the poker was back in its spot. Kylo was gone. For a blissful moment, she thought that maybe the last few hours had been a nightmare; it was better than the alternative, which was that she had spent a night with a two hundred year old ghost.

Suddenly, coming from somewhere outside, she heard her name being called.

A faded curtain fluttered and she realized the window was cracked open, allowing her to hear the voices from the grounds. She went to it and, to her relief, saw Rose and a few other people walking around.

She tried to push the window open more but it wouldn’t give. There was a film over everything that coated her fingers. “Rose,” she yelled down. “Rose!”

Rose stopped, a flashlight in her hand. The sky was starting to lighten. She looked around and yelled Rey’s name again. Not caring about the glass, Rey slapped it hard, making it rattle as she screamed her friend’s name loudly, trying to get her attention.

This time Rose looked up, confused. Rey waved, but Rose didn’t wave back. Armitage came up to her and shined his light up. He shook his head and shrugged. An icy prickle crawled up her spine. They couldn’t see her. *Was she invisible?* No, it had to be the window. Probably too dirty.

She turned and found Kylo watching her from the open doorway. “They can’t hear you. Dawn is almost here. The curse is beginning to draw us behind the veil. I had hoped…” he looked away. “That it would not pull us into it. I am sorry for that, my love.”

“No.” The dawn had not broken yet. He said he couldn’t stop her.

She ran.

He allowed her to pass him.

“Rey, my darling, it’s no use. We have mere minutes. The pull to the darkness will terrify you… let me help you cross,” he spoke as he followed her. The hallways were no longer lit, but the windows gave her enough light to see how different the estate had become.

The paintings were no longer visible in their gold frames, but covered by sheets. The floors were lackluster and dusty. When she arrived at the red carpet that would lead her to the staircase, it was frayed and old. She could even see patches where it had worn down to floorboards.

Everything she had been told was true, and she felt a terrible sense of unbecoming as she ran. Her steps felt lighter, and she heard whispers coming from the corners of the room. When she saw the stairs, she cried with relief.

“Kira—stop!” Kylo called to her. “Kira, you have to come back. Don’t leave me. Don’t…”

But she was taking the stairs two at a time. When she saw the fountain (or what was left of it) she felt hope. The doors to the outside were in front of her. She thought she heard Kylo yell her real name, but she turned the door handle and spilled out onto the other side.

The whispers went silent. The sky was tinged with light, but it was not dawn, not yet. Across the lawn she saw Armitage giving Rose a hug, her best friend weeping.

“Hey!” Rey walked toward them but stopped when she saw flashes of red and blue lights. Police cars were outside the gate. She could even see Alex’s car and wondered with sickening dread what Kylo had done to him.

Rose looked toward her and started to push Armitage away, her eyes going wide.

“Rose!” Rey felt her own tears coming. “I’m here. I’m—”

Dawn broke. The sun lit the sky.

She felt a weird pull in her chest that became stronger as the seconds passed. Something was wrong. She felt her body want to turn around. Terrified, she tried to take a step forward and couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, Rey.” Kylo’s voice was behind her. When she turned, he was only a few feet away. He held a hand to her, beseeching her to take it. “But the house is calling us back. I can barely resist it myself.”

She shook her head even as the doors opened behind him and the whispers called out to them. Rose cried out in the distance.

“I saw her. I saw her, Armie! She was right there.”

Rey tried to fight the compulsion, but the act was impossible. The pull was so strong she couldn’t turn around.

“But I made it outside.” Rey dropped to her knees, trying to hold on to the ground, but the house kept dragging her back. “I made it outside.”

“It was the ring,” Kylo answered. “You had to wear the ring till dawn.”

When her body dragged close to him, he scooped her up and carried her the rest of the way.

Then the doors closed behind them and they were enveloped in darkness.

Chapter 3

Rey pressed her face into Kylo's clothes, crying out as the darkness took hold. A sharp pang went through her chest, she vaguely heard him comfort her, and then everything went quiet.

She was so consumed by her terror that it took a long minute to realize it was over. Kylo was holding her, but the vice-like sensation that had pulled her back to the mansion was gone and so was the coldness.

"We broke the curse…" Kylo spoke, unbridled awe in his voice.

She peeked an eye open and found herself still inside the mansion, but everything was different. The fountain was in pristine shape, bubbling with crystal clear water, and there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. Everything was polished and clean and looked brand new. She turned her head around, not understanding.

"Is it Halloween? Are we ghosts?"

"No, my love. It is dawn. We are flesh and blood."

She could see the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows and knew he was telling the truth. He set her down and took her hand, looking around the mansion in wonder. She was too stunned to protest. If it was dawn and the curse was over, what did that mean for them? Had Kylo been brought back to life? Was he now going to live in the modern world? Unsure of what to do, she followed him like a puppy. The fear was still there, but now she had hope that she was not doomed after all.

He reached the front door and turned to look at her, his face full of joy. "Do not worry. You are my bride. I will take the best care of you now."

Poor guy. If they were truly back in the regular world, he was going to have a very hard time adjusting. Part of her almost felt a little sorry for him, despite all he had done to trick her. Women no longer needed husbands, and his money from the Victorian era was probably long gone. She still had five hundred dollars from the party in her purse—maybe she would give it to him, to help him get some new clothes.

Kylo pushed the front door open and they stepped outside.

The sunrise was brilliant and beautiful; varying shades of pink bled into a deep red that painted the entire sky. For a moment, she was so distracted that she didn't notice something was… off. She blinked and took in her immediate surroundings for the first time.

The lawn was the same, but there were people casually walking around who seemed to be in Victorian era outfits—no sign of Rose or Hux anywhere. One man was sweeping the walkway. Two women in brown shifts and white blouses were carrying luggage inside. On the steps below them, a blonde-haired man was talking to an older woman in a stiff petticoat, her grayish-brown hair pulled back into a tight bun. Outside the gate, she saw a black horse and a sleek, shiny buggy.

The men and women all stopped talking as soon as they noticed Rey and Kylo. They looked between them with expressions of pure shock, which Rey mirrored on her own face. *Where was Rose? Where were the police? What was going on?* She tried to break free of Kylo's grip, but he doubled down on his hold.

"Mrs. Heather," Kylo said to the woman in the petticoat. "Please come quick. My wife has need of you."

Rey turned to regard him, but his expression was unreadable. "Kylo… what's going on?"

He didn't answer and instead gave his attention to the woman fast climbing the steps. She had lost her shock and now seemed almost frantic. "Master Ren, her dress! Her feet! Her hair! Her—"

"Hold your tongue. You must help me attend to my wife. We are married now, and that is all that matters. I need you to—"

"No," Rey hissed. She tried to struggle, but he gave her a pained look and firmly guided her across the threshold, back inside. The last place she wanted to go.

"What has happened to her?" the older woman asked, aghast. "How could you have wed her? And what is this costume Kira is wearing?"

"I'm not Kira," Rey said, her knees starting to tremble. None of this made any sense. "Please… I've fallen through some sort of time—"

"Yes, it's a wedding dress," Kylo said sharply, cutting off Rey's babble. Mrs. Heather said no more, but her eyes scanned the dress doubtfully. Kylo continued, "I found Kira last night. To keep her reputation intact we were married without a lavish ceremony. But she's unwell… I fear all my schooling may have overwhelmed her delicate nature. We need to get her upstairs to bed, where I will make it known her safe return and our nuptial."

The older woman gave Rey a pitying look. "I often told the Master he put too much on your shoulders. We'll get you upstairs. Some hot tea and warm blankets should help."

"No," Rey shook her head, turning to Kylo to beseech him to help her. He cupped her cheek as if to kiss her, and she clung to him, openly begging him. "Kylo, please."

He leaned close and whispered in her ear. "Please, my darling, trust me. They will think you are mad if you try to tell them the truth. I must attend to my house, and you must not be seen until I can figure out what to do, if anything."

She wanted to argue, but he was right. If they had truly gone back to 1822, she would find little help from anyone except for him. He kissed her cheek and she reluctantly let Mrs. Heather lead her further inside the house.

Once they were alone, Mrs. Heather made no secret of her thoughts.

"It's a good thing the staff is only just returning. The few out front can be silenced… if they want to keep their jobs. I'm sure Master Ren will give them a good coin as a thank you for it. The entire staff being dismissed last night was odd enough—and with strict instructions not to return until dawn. We were even given permission to take the day off if we liked, which I'm sure most of the girls will do. Probably a good thing, as they gossip like little birds. But

I'll be honest, I was too worried to take the day off. Master Ren was in such a dark state when we left."

Rey stopped listening as the woman talked. She was trying to remember when things like the phone were invented. Electricity. Who was the president? She had no idea. The house had a chill to it and she wondered how the thing was heated. She wanted to laugh or maybe cry as she struggled to remember all her history lessons.

Mrs. Heather broke her thoughts by shaking her arm. "Have you heard a word I've said, girl? You act as if you have never seen this house before. It's only been a few months. Why, we even kept your room for you; Master Ren never doubted your return." She clicked her tongue. "Poor thing—your mind was never strong. Have you forgotten everything? I've heard of such shocks."

"I'm sorry." Rey didn't know what else to say. Her mind scrambled for something that would satisfy the woman's curiosity. "I'm not sure what I know."

"Well, no matter. This way." Mrs. Heather gestured toward the stairs. They walked to the second floor in silence and turned down a hallway that led to a door with a gold knob.

The woman used a key to open the door and gestured for her to enter. When she did, she saw it was a room set up for a lady. There was a vanity with a cushioned seat, an armoire, and a four poster bed. On the vanity were several small items: a silver mirror, a comb, a brush, pins and brooches, and even a closed fan.

Mrs. Heather went to the armoire and opened it, pulling out a nightgown. "In my fifty-three years, I never thought I'd see you return. A summer wedding ruined. Master Ren spent *months* searching with no clues as to your whereabouts, but he was determined. Where did he find you? Nevermind. I hope nowhere that would endanger your soul."

"Here," Rey murmured. She gazed out the window with a blank expression. "On the lawn."

From her vantage point she could see the spread of the backyard. A stout woman with her hair hidden by a kerchief was taking sheets out and pinning them to a line. Her hands were red as her cheeks; she could be anywhere from thirty to fifty.

A hand on her back made Rey jump.

"Found here on the lawn?" Mrs. Heather kept a hand on her shoulder as she searched for a zipper. 'You must have come to your senses and returned. Found it a cold world out there, did you?' She gave a dry chuckle as she unzipped the back of Rey's dress. "That man loves you beyond sense and reason. I don't think you realize how lucky you are… You know, Kylo's mother will be heartbroken you didn't wear the wedding dress she had taken such pains to secure from the city. But that can't be helped now. God have mercy, girl, you drove that poor man close to madness. I was worried when he had us all leave. Forgive me, but I thought he might… well, nevermind. Terrible, sinful thought."

The woman liked the sound of her own voice, that much was clear. The dress slipped off and Rey heard the lady give another huff. "Look at these under clothes. I swear. We'll burn them and put you in something proper. At least you are back. Perhaps Master Ren will leave

the bottle alone now; even his mother could not calm his temper when he had had too much to drink."

Rey felt like a doll as Mrs. Heather pushed a nightgown over her head and helped her into it. When she was turned toward the bed, some of the sternness left the woman's tone.

"You're shaking like a leaf. Some rest will help. If you are having second thoughts, best lay those in the ground as there's nothing to do about it now. If you try to run away, he'll bring you back, and this time make good on his promise to commit you. Dr. Snoke will no doubt be by to check on you too, and you do not want to cross him. I know I should not speak unkindly of a christian man, but he enjoys his job too much. Nance Wilson's husband had her committed under his care and she came out such a broken little thing."

The woman turned the covers so Rey could slip under them. "It's strange, but when I first saw you, I thought you were someone else. But now…" Mrs. Heather gave her a warm smile. "It's good to have you home. Get some rest. I'll see that no one bothers you."

Rey couldn't keep up with the whirlwind of information she was receiving. It had to be a dream. No one could go back in time. *Just as no one could turn into a ghost?* She furrowed her brow, feeling like there was an answer in there somewhere. But her eyes felt heavy and she soon fell asleep.

"Kira. Kira. *Rey* . Wake up."

Rey's eyes fluttered open to find Kylo looming over her. The sight made her adrenaline spike and she instantly bolted upright.

"No need for a fright," he assured her. He was dressed in a long white nightgown and he held a candle, like something out of a Dickens novel. She scooted up in bed, and he put the candle on the nightstand.

"I've secured our marriage papers. They were already written, we need only to sign them. A few silvers in a priest's hand and we are officially man and wife. Our story will be that I found you living with your cousin—a spinster woman who attested to your chastity and safety. You and I were quickly wed at her small cottage."

Rey shook her head. "How do I get back *home?*"

"Home?" Kylo looked at her, baffled. "We *are* home. I am truly sorry about your plight; I am sure that you have parents, siblings or acquaintances who will miss you. I will do my best to comfort you in their absence. But I'm trying to establish you as a lady here, so you can live in good social standing without being shunned."

Now it was her turn to look at him in disbelief. She bawled her fists, wanting very much to punch him. "I *don't* want to be a lady. I *don't* want to be married to you. I want to go home. Do you understand? I'm going to leave and figure out how to get back to 2022. With or without your help."

Rey moved to get out of bed, but Kylo was quick to push her back down. Her anger turned to fear as she tried to fight him. However, with little effort, he pinned her wrists over her head with one hand and used his other to cover her mouth. His body was too heavy for her to break free. She muffled curses into his palm.

Finally, when she realized she couldn't escape, she stilled under him. He didn't take his hand off her mouth, but met her gaze in the candlelight. His hair was ruffled and he didn't look happy.

"Your name is Kira," he said through clenched teeth. "You are my wife. We will never speak openly of your past after tonight. You were on a sinful path no good woman should ever pursue. A fate that would tarnish your reputation forever and leave you destitute, if not worse."

Rey huffed an argument behind his palm. He had no idea what her life would have been like. He must have read something in her eyes, because his expression softened.

"No one will believe you," he said. "I'll always know… and love you all the more for it. But there is no other option for us. We must make the best of it. Please my darling. I love you. My anger at you may have burned out, but my love only grew stronger, more sure."

His breath was warm on her skin as he kissed her neck. She whimpered and tried to shake her head, but he still kept his hand over her mouth. When he moved, she felt his erection press into her thigh. Her eyes widened in fear.

"You are my wife," he said gruffly, against her protests. "This is my right. And the sooner we accept our roles the better."

His hand left her mouth. "Do not scream—I'd rather not have the servants think I abuse you. But if you do, no one will rescue you. I've given strict instructions not to be disturbed."

"So that's it?" Rey spat. "You rape me and call it marriage?"

"Rape?" Kylo hissed. "A man cannot rape his wife."

"I am not your wife," she reminded him. "I am not Kira. My name is Rey Johnson and I do not belong here. Let me go."

"You took my ring and pronounced yourself my bride." His mouth was on hers, kissing her as if it was his way to silence any further logic. With his free hand he moved the hem of her nightgown up. She bit his lip, making him draw back with a curse.

He touched his bleeding lip with a wince. His eyes met hers. "None of that, or I'll be forced to correct the evil out of you. A woman submits to her husband."

"Stop calling yourself that! I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on Earth." Rey tried to get her wrists free, but he had her in an iron grip. "You're a vile monster. Get *off* me. I can see why Kira left you. You're a big awful—"

"*Enough.*" He flipped her over and hiked her nightgown up over her butt before she could blink. His cock pressed between her legs. She shrieked and was rewarded with his hand over her mouth again.

His other hand moved between her legs, stroking her softly. "You may not be Kira, but you have the same fire. I'll tame you as I couldn't her."

She tried to pry his hand off her mouth, but he pressed his forehead against the back of her head. "Shh… my love," he whispered over and over, all the while his fingers were growing

slick with her arousal. She felt her body respond, and worse, she arched into him, feeling his hard length against her.

He slipped a finger inside and she made a low noise in her throat.

He hummed in approval. “Innocent and intact. Do not worry, I will calm you first and make you feel good. Snoke said I should do this often to quiet your nerves. I was too afraid to try before marriage—it seemed improper and might lead to sinfulness on my part. Snoke wanted to do this to you too, but I would never let another man touch you, even the doctor.”

She grasped the sheets, her protests no longer sounding like protests.

“I know you’re not Kira. You’re something better. Purer,” he assured her or himself, Rey couldn’t tell. “She ran off so I could find you. My true soulmate.”

She felt her climax approach. He slipped two fingers inside her, pumping shallowly as his palm rubbed her clit. It was too much and she fell over the edge. Hard. She made little noises as he murmured encouragement and let go of her mouth.

“Please…” she begged. “I don’t want to be a wife…”

He shifted behind her, his cock notching at her entrance. “What else is there for a woman?”

She tried to say more, but he was inside her, stretching her. *Too much.* She huffed, biting the pillow and crying through her teeth. At least she was wet and he seemed like he was trying to be gentle.

He pushed into her again, trying to seat himself fully. Rey choked out, “I can’t… I’ve never done this before.”

“Neither have I, my love.” He dug his fingers into her hips and pulled out before thrusting all the way in. She squeezed her eyes shut and widened her legs, taking some pressure off as he started to move inside her. The pleasure from earlier was all but gone.

“It hurts,” she pleaded.

“Pain is Eve’s punishment,” he said hoarsely. “I have been waiting for you—for this—for two hundred years.”

His pace picked up, and a low groan in his throat made a new worry come to Rey’s mind.

“Don’t,” she said, trying to squirm away from him. “I’m not on anything, I don’t want to get pregnant, *please.*”

The plea was lost on him as he buried his face in her neck. He circled her waist and pulled her flush against him as he came inside of her. For a horrible minute, she wondered if it would have been better if she had let Alex have her. At least then she could have taken a morning after pill. She could’ve had a future.

She sniffled, feeling tears slip down her cheek.

“We’re married,” he said, gathering her in his arms. “In the sight of God now. Do not cry. What happened was holy.”

“I want to go home,” she sobbed. “I hate you.”

He nuzzled her neck, holding her closer. “You’ll forget who you were and come to love this life. And me,” he promised. She wondered hollowly if those were the same words he’d said to Kira. “I am sure by next summer or fall you will be with child, fully accustomed to this life. That evil in you purged.”

“I don’t want your baby or you.” She struggled. “You’re no better than Alex. You bast—”

His hand was back over her mouth.

“None of that. Seems you need to be calmed again.” He crushed her into the mattress, his hand slipping between her legs. “Such tantrums can be solved.”

The hate and anger she felt became secondary as he once again stroked between her legs. Whether intentional or not, he was being slow and methodical as he brought her to a second climax. By the time she was close, her fight was gone and she shamefully tried to rub into his hand.

She whimpered, and he kissed her cheek. “Your name is Kira. You are my wife, and you will be obedient to me. You will call me husband and master. Do not defy me, my love.”

He kept her in limbo for several agonizing moments before he let her come; it was both blissful and sickening in need. His hand between her legs cupped her possessively.

“You are mine forever now. I’ll never have another and nor will you.” She felt him hard against her again. “I’m sorry… my need for you is strong.”

He had her on her back the next moment. He no longer had to cover her mouth, but instead lazily wrapped his fingers around her throat to keep her still. She could barely muster a protest as he pushed inside her again. He took her silence for obedience.

“Good… good,” he grunted.

It didn’t hurt as bad the second time. He seemed like he was in better control of himself. His nightgown was sticky with sweat and the candle gave her a better view of him. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes dark and hungry.

The bed creaked. Shadows danced behind the candle as it flickered. She watched the flame and wondered if she would forget the modern world as he promised. Already she felt less and less like the person she was yesterday. He moved inside of her and she knew he would never have enough. He was a man driven mad with obsession and fervent belief she was his. The night seemed to stretch on and she wondered if it would have been so bad to have stayed a ghost.

Chapter 4

When Rey awoke the next morning, she was freezing and had to pee, but her door was locked. She tried to jiggle the handle several times, to no avail. She rubbed her arms and looked around for anything she could use to try and pick the lock. It was then she noticed a small basin on the floor that had to be a chamber pot.

It took less than a minute for her to decide to use it.

The area between her legs was still sore from last night; she wondered how long it would be before Kylo decided to visit her again. He had surprised her yesterday, but she'd be damned if he would be so lucky again. What she needed to do was get the hell out of here.

First she needed to get dressed, which was its own problem as she had no idea what women wore in 1822. The armoire was full of clothes: dresses, petticoats, undergarments… but she stared at everything dumbly, unsure how to put it all on. She wanted nothing more than a pair of jeans and a sweater.

There was a soft knock on the door and the sound of a key in the lock. She turned, afraid to see Kylo, but instead it was Mrs. Heather.

"Good morning," Mrs. Heather said, shutting the door behind her. "Master Ren has asked for me to assist you in getting ready and dressed for breakfast, which I told him was most peculiar, but…" she gave Rey an indecipherable once over. "He claims you have lost much of your memory and thinks perhaps a woman's help will be preferred over his."

"Yes, thank you. If you could help me dress, I will be leaving the residence immediately."

Mrs. Heather gave her an exasperated look. "You just came back and already you want to leave? You should have thought of that before you married. You have no money. No family. No prospects. And no one in this town is going to help you anymore. In fact, if Master Ren ever finds out who helped you escape the first time… may God have mercy on his soul. I'm afraid leaving is not an option, dear. Master Ren has forbidden it."

"You can't keep me prisoner here," Rey snapped. "I'm going to…" She pursed her lips, not sure how to complete the sentence. "Find other accommodations."

"Hmph, as you did the first time? What a terrible state you returned in. Enough of this foolishness. You cannot seriously believe yourself capable of leaving—you don't even know how to dress yourself."

Rey tried to keep her temper at bay, speaking evenly to the woman. "Well… I'll take my chances." She looked at the ring on her finger and wondered how much she could get for it. There had to be an inn nearby or a place to rent. She would figure out a way to get back to her own time. But she didn't need to be under the same roof of a man that would rape her in the name of marriage.

"Chances? What a silly girl you are."

“I’ll accept your help with dressing, but as for the rest—my mind is made up,” Rey firmly said.

Mrs. Heather arched an eyebrow. “Master Ren is right. What patience he has. I marvel at it sometimes. A lesser man would have washed his hands of you and taken a proper wife from a well-to-do family.”

“He’s more than welcome to find himself another wife,” Rey huffed. “I would like to get dressed.”

Mrs. Heather’s face seemed to pinch. Her eyes narrowed. “Time away has made your tongue sharp. You’ll get the birch again if you don’t learn how to bridle it.”

Rey couldn’t help it; she rolled her eyes. “Jesus, are you guys for real?”

The slap across her cheek caught her by surprise, whipping her head to the side.

“How dare you take the Lord’s name in vain. This is a Christian house.” Mrs. Heather grabbed her ear, making Rey yelp, and dragged her toward the armoire. “God has charged me to make you a lady and it seems I must start all over.”

“Let go!” Rey shrieked, struggling.

“You will find your manners,” Mrs. Heather said, letting go of her ear. She opened the armoire and started pulling out clothes. “Now, if you show perfect obedience, I’ll ask Master Ren to have mercy on you and use his hand instead of the birch stick.”

Rey held her tongue, but only so she could get dressed and leave this God forsaken place. Her ear throbbed and she had a feeling it was only the tip of the iceberg of what awaited her if she stayed.

The woman removed Rey’s nightgown and then redressed her in stockings, undergarments, a corset, a skirt, a blouse, and then a smaller jacket. Rey wondered if she was going to wear the entire closet. She had boots that laced all the way up to her knees, and when she was dressed, the woman attacked her hair as if it had personally offended her.

After she was finally finished, Rey looked in the mirror and saw someone who could belong in 1822. Mrs. Heather patted her carefully pinned hair and smiled at her handiwork. “Perhaps looking civilized will help you remember yourself.”

Rey said nothing. She noticed her purse from last night on the floor and managed to grab it before it could be burned in the proverbial fire. Thankfully, it was a simple white clutch with a leather strap and wasn’t too out of place. When she put it over her shoulder, Mrs. Heather clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Ugly, but I’ll let Master Ren decide whether or not you can keep it. I’ve burned the wedding dress and effects.”

Together they started toward the dining room, but that was not where Rey intended to go. When they hit the stairs, she headed straight for the door.

It turned out the butler, who was standing by the front door, was very strong for his age. And so was Mrs. Heather.

Rey screamed, but two more men from outside came to help restrain her. By the time she was back in her room, Kylo had joined them. She called them every terrible name she could

think of and demanded someone call the police, but no one listened. Instead, Kylo used a cord to tie her wrists to each bed post, despite her struggling. A clean rag was put in her mouth to gag her.

“I’m so sorry,” Kylo said to them all. “She is very unwell. I will see to her now. Thank you all for your assistance and please do not discuss my wife’s condition to anyone else. I will send for the doctor.”

“I’ll see that none of the staff gossip,” Mrs. Heather promised, hands on her hips as she surveyed the staff. The men from outside kept their eyes down and nodded before leaving. The butler wiped some sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief, bowed gracefully, and followed them out.

Rey watched as Kylo closed the door, resting his hand on it for a long moment, his back turned to her. She tested her bonds and found they wouldn’t give. The cord was yellow and soft and she thought it had probably been taken from the curtains.

He didn’t turn back around for a long while and she had a feeling he was attempting to get his temper under control. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and solemn.

“You have accomplished nothing more than making yourself look a fool. I wanted to believe you would accept Mrs. Heather’s help without complaint.” His fingers thrummed on the door for a moment before he turned to look at her. “I should have known better.”

She gave a muffled shriek as he walked over to her, a thunderous expression on his face. She worried he would physically strike her, but he stopped at her bedside and once again tried to collect himself. After another minute or two, he ran a hand through his hair and let out a breath.

“You do not know this world yet. There are rules and laws you must abide by. You wish to leave and yet… you would be as lost in my world as I would be in yours. You need me.”

He reached out and stroked her cheek, tracing her jawline. His thumb brushed a tear away. “My sweet wife. Will you now allow me to be your husband?”

It was too much; tears slid freely down her cheeks. She wanted to go home. When he sat next to her on the bed, she kicked her feet in protest, feeling very much like a child.

“Do you need to be calmed again?” He posed it as a question, but his hand was already moving under her dress. She shook her head, but he gave her an empathetic tut. “A woman cannot be reasoned with in hysterics. I will untie you once I’m sure this fit has passed.”

He deftly worked his way through her layers until he had access between her legs, and then he began touching her. She closed her eyes and turned her head, trying to block out what he was doing. Undeterred, he hummed a little tune that sounded like a church hymn. She hated him. If she could go back in time, she would have left him to his miserable fate.

“There are no calling inventions,” he said. That got her attention, which made him smile as he continued to stroke her. ‘A woman without a male escort or family member would end up in a workhouse or worse… and you have not a penny to your name.’ He rubbed a small circle around her clit, making her thighs shake. “You do not have recommendations for a job or the pedigree for a governess. I have a feeling you do not cook, nor have talent as a seamstress. The playhouse would treat you worse than a whore and people would mock you.”

Rey hated his words because she knew there was truth in them. He slipped one finger inside of her, then two, and gave a low throaty noise in satisfaction. “And your hands are delicate… a lady’s hands. You are not made to work yourself to the bone. You will run this house in time, see to our children’s education, and at night you will be a good wife to me. I will provide as is my duty to you.”

She could not block out his touch or his words. His offer became both a lifeline and an anchor around her heart. Was this really to be her fate? Could she accept him and this terrible existence as a better alternative than being destitute on the streets?

He saw her resolve falter and kissed her temple. “Forces have bound us together, for good or evil—or perhaps both. I do not want to treat you unkindly, but if you defy me… I will be a hard man to live with.”

She saw his lips press into a thin line. He had her almost to the brink when he withdrew his hand, making her feel a confusing mixture of relief and despair. “Perhaps it is best if you are chastised for your mistreatment of Mrs. Heather before being rewarded. So you do not think such behavior can be tolerated.”

She didn’t understand, but then he pulled her stockings and undergarments down and pushed her long skirt up to her waist. He hooked an arm under her knees, drawing them to her chest. She was still confused until he delivered the first hard swat on her bare ass.

A startled yelp escaped her throat and he gave her an almost paternal look. “I should use the switch; however, as this is your first offense, I shall only use my hand. But do not think I will always be so kind.”

He easily controlled her struggles and gave her another hard smack. She was sensitive and now the pain amplified it. From behind her gag she tried to scream, but he delivered another one and another until all fight left her and she was reduced to a sobbing mess.

“There,” he said after a last stinging swat. ‘All is done.’ He let go of her legs, but didn’t pull up her bloomers. Instead, his fingers started stroking through her folds again. “You’re not used to such things. A woman left to govern herself will be led astray. A man must guide his wife in all things.”

Rey didn’t think she could be aroused after all that, but his touch became a balm. She hated how wet she was and how good it felt when he touched her. He laid beside her on the bed and she tried to turn away, but he pinched her clit, forcing her to look back at him.

“No more hiding from me. You have to accept this life. Your name is Kira,” he told her. “You will be confined to your room until I know you’ve accepted this truth.”

Her heels dug into the mattress and she gave up trying to fight his touch. When she came, he took the gag out. “What’s your name?”

“Rey. My name is Rey. I won’t be Kira…”

He put the gag back in, disappointment etched on his face as he pulled her bloomers back up and straightened her dress.

The hope of being untied went with him as he headed to the door. Before he left, he gave her one last look. “We have nothing but time, and I am a very patient man. For two hundred

years I have waited—remember that next time I take the gag out. You are Kira now. Rey no longer exists… She hasn't even been born yet."

With that, he shut the door.

Chapter 5

Rey looked out her window and saw clouds that were thick and dark with rain. The trees shuddered as the wind picked up, scattering red and gold leaves all across the lawn. Winter was coming and nature was stripping everything down for its arrival.

"There's going to be a storm," Kylo said as he entered her bedroom. Rey didn't turn around or acknowledge his presence. "I have always loved rainstorms—they serve as a reminder to fear our almighty God."

She tried not to flinch away from him when he stood beside her. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit with shiny black boots, holding a top hat in his hands. He seemed relaxed despite the stiff pose, and she imagined it was because he thought her obedient.

Rey had spent almost the entire day yesterday confined to bed, where she realized how helpless she was against him. No matter how much she had cried for help, no one ever came. Kylo only took pity and untied her when it was time for dinner. *"Kira is a pretty name,"* he had said. *"Less masculine than Rey. It won't be so bad."*

Rey had kept quiet and managed to hold her tongue during dinner. In return, Kylo had allowed her to sleep alone, placing only a chaste kiss on her lips before bed.

Now Kylo was back in her room, no doubt expecting to continue their farce.

"I want to sleep alone tonight," Rey said. She tried to make it sound more like a demand and less like a request.

"I can leave you alone *after,"* he countered with an air of exasperation.

"I agreed to being Kira. Can you not give me time to adjust?"

"Time?" He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "After that old crone cursed me, *time* has taken on many different meanings."

"What did this crone get in return?" Rey asked hotly. Her fingers once again tugged on her collar, still uncomfortable in her clothes. "Or did you give her your soul?"

"She didn't ask for that," he answered, ignoring her cynical tone. "She's a gypsy who lives on the edge of town. I gave her a deed for some property out there. The land is barely worth the paper I wrote it on; the ground is dry and filled with thistle and stone—not good for cattle."

She was about to tell him that 'gypsy' wasn't culturally appropriate, but then she realized he was telling her something important. If this crone had cursed him with magic, perhaps with that same magic she could return Rey to the 21st century.

"Won't the old woman and her family leave… or starve?" Rey asked, trying to be subtle.

"You should not worry," he said, holding his hat with one hand so he could slide his other around her waist. She allowed it, forcing her expression to stay neutral. "They seem to thrive

well enough. But who knows—a harsh winter or two and they may leave. They certainly are not allowed into town, and few people will hire them."

Her mind turned over all the possibilities. If he let her out of the house, maybe she could figure out a way to find the old woman.

Thunder boomed overhead, surprising them both. The sound had never bothered Rey before, but an idea popped into her head; she turned into Kylo's arms and buried her face in his shirt as if terrified.

He held her close and, as she predicted, he reveled in her need of comfort. His voice became tender once again. "It's going to be quite a storm. Would you like to stay in my bedroom tonight? I have a fireplace."

Rey nodded, afraid to speak as she could only take her acting so far. Kylo tilted her chin up and searched her face. Her heart beat rapidly. She was afraid he was going to sense her deception and punish her, but instead, he leaned down and kissed her lips.

The kiss was close-lipped, but it felt like it lasted a lifetime. When he broke away, she saw that same consuming devotion in his eyes, as if some inner fire had been stoked to blaze again.

"I cannot give you time, but I can be gentle. Submit to me and let me show you how a man worships what God has given him."

She couldn't fake affection, but he probably wouldn't believe her if she did, anyway. She fiddled with the wedding band on her finger. "I want to try…"

She trailed off and pretended to be flustered, unable to say more. The words were exactly what he wanted to hear; he drew her close, holding her in a tight embrace. Lightning struck again and lit the room. His hand cupped the back of her head as he planted a kiss on her temple.

"That is all I ask of you, my dear."

Kylo was so thrilled with her compliance that he carried her to his bedroom. She expected him to get straight to the sex, but instead he helped her undress and then gave her his robe. It was huge on her small frame and soft inside. She tied the sash as he poured her a glass of wine.

The fire was already burning in the hearth and she smirked inwardly when she noticed he had hid the fire poker behind a vase. When he handed her the glass of wine, she had deja vu of the night they met—except this time, she knew better than to trust him.

He stripped down to his undershirt and pants, then neatly set aside his jacket and other garments for the servants to take later.

She could tell he was a man of ritual. Everything he did had a calculated grace to it. She would never fit into his life, no matter how hard she tried. He had to realize that. She stared into her wine, wanting very much to get drunk.

"You probably think I'm going to pretend you're Kira," he said, pouring himself a glass. "And that I'm going to superimpose all of my memories on you. Force you to play the part, even in private."

Rey was caught off guard by the conversation. “You’ve made it clear you want me to be her.”

“I want you to have her *name* . I cannot conjure up another explanation for your presence. But I do not desire Kira anymore, and I will not pretend you are her. You are an entirely different person to me.”

Rey sipped her wine. She wasn’t sure if he expected that to make her feel better.

He tried again. “Tell me about your past. About your family. I know so little about *you.”*

She wanted to ask if that made kidnapping and rape more palpable, but she held her tongue. This was an olive branch. If she had any hope of leaving the house, she needed him to believe her compliant.

“I don’t have any family,” she admitted. “I was in foster care… what you would call an orphan. But with less *Oliver Twist.”*

He sat down in a chair beside her. “Oliver Twists?”

“You don’t know Charles Dickens? You’ll like him… when he gets to writing.”

Rey thought about some of her other favorite authors. If she was remembering her dates correctly, Edgar Allan Poe hadn’t penned *The Raven* yet, and Jane Austen would have died one, maybe two years ago. But Bronte was still alive. If Rey wanted to, she could probably *meet* her.

Hello, have you written Jane Eyre yet? I would really like to read it. The thought made Rey laugh; she clapped a hand over her mouth as Kylo frowned.

“Sorry, I was trying to remember who’s dead, who’s alive, and who hasn’t been born yet. I should have paid better attention in history class. I don’t even know who the president is.” She stifled another giggle. The whole thing felt so surreal, she was on the verge of laughing hysterically

“James Monroe,” Kylo answered.

“Eighth president?”

“The fifth president.”

“Only five presidents… That means slavery hasn’t even been abolished.” She gave him a sharp look. “If you own any slaves you’re going to free them. And also you’re a horrible person.”

“No. All paid staff. You can look at their references, if you’d like.”

Rey took another drink. “Women can vote and run for president in my time. We can also support ourselves just fine. We have equal rights—there is no job a man can do that a woman cannot do as well.”

Kylo actually seemed rather impressed by this news. He raised his glass to her in congratulations and said, “What a wonder your world is. I was never able to see much because I couldn’t leave the house, and I was only there for a single night. Most time there was no one. It was…” He stopped and seemed to reconsider. “Well, it’s behind me now.”

“Tell me,” she said, curling into the chair.

His fingers drummed on the glass. “The first night was the hardest. The house looked the same. Most of the servants were here, and even my mother. She was much the same, but her face was a mask of grief and she wore all black. I didn’t understand that a year had passed. I cannot tell you how frustrated and helpless I felt, unable to talk to a soul or leave. And then dawn came and the curse pulled me back. It seemed like a second had passed, and then when I woke again, my mother’s hair had gone all white.”

It was silent for a moment before he cleared his throat and waved his glass dismissively. “It didn’t take long to figure out the rest. By the tenth year, the house was empty. I assumed my mother had died and we had no other family to take over. After that, other people tried to live here, but it never lasted. I watched the house turn to shambles from the inside out.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she meant it. It sounded like a lonely, sad existence. Another thought came to her. “You said you couldn’t interact with your mother, but you were able to talk to Alex and I—and the house was pristine when I entered.”

“I was as surprised as you. Perhaps it was because fate meant us to be together.” His hand slipped in his pocket and he withdrew the same key he had used on Halloween night. “As for the house—I had this key in my pocket when the crone cursed me. Whether she meant to or not, it had its own magic. When I wanted to haunt my own residence as I had left it, I would turn the key in a lock.”

“Did you use it often?” Rey asked.

“Not often… I walked the grounds as much as I could. Not sure if I had simply damned myself forever.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Men and children couldn’t see me, but an occasional young woman would. If she screamed or became afraid, I would vanish from her sight. I think the longest conversation I had was toward the end when a young girl was bold enough to ask if I was the ghost. I invited her in and then she screamed.”

Rey wondered if that girl was the same one she had overheard the kids talking about. Mrs. Marshall.

“I didn’t know you were a ghost when I entered the house… doesn’t that count as trickery?” she asked.

She held her glass out for more wine despite the spinning in her head. Kylo filled her glass and handed it back to her.

“I told you who I was when you asked; it mattered not that you didn’t believe me. You were the spitting image of Kira. Part of me thought the devil was mocking me, and you would vanish again just to break my heart. Imagine my surprise when you put my wedding band on and agreed to be my wife.”

“I was drunk and thought you were an actor.”

“I know…” he said, and she heard the first bit of contriteness in his tone. “Would you believe me if I told you I tried to slip the ring off your finger? After you fainted.”

Rey couldn't hide her disbelief.

Kylo nodded in confirmation. "I told you the years had worn my anger away. I felt guilty and tried to take the ring off, but it wouldn't move from your finger. It was then that I knew Kira wasn't my true love, *you* were. You *are."*

Rey rubbed her cheek, which felt warm to the touch. She blinked and tried to understand what he was telling her. He had tried to do the right thing and not let the curse take her? His face looked honest enough, but he had tricked her before.

Setting down her wine glass, she studied the simple wedding band. It didn't seem like anything special, but when she tried to slip it off, it wouldn't budge. The ring still fit her perfectly; neither too tight nor too loose. Surprised, she looked at Kylo, who held up his own hand.

"Mine will not come off, either."

The revelation made the wine in her stomach churn. The crone might not be able to save her if the magic had bound them forever. Tears pricked her eyes and she tried to wipe them away before Kylo saw.

He set down his wine glass and moved closer to her.

"I'm okay… really," she tried and failed to reassure him.

He took a knee in front of her. "I have caused you much grief. Forgive me. What's done is done, my dear wife." She noticed he begged for forgiveness and absolved himself in the same sentence. She turned her head away, knowing he would see the hatred in her eyes. He continued, "Would you, in the secret of our bedroom, wish me to call you by your given name? Would it ease some of the pain?"

She stared at him through blurry tears. His large hands cupped her cheeks, brushing away the wetness.

"Rey. My sweetest wife. So brave."

It seemed some inner dam broke and she couldn't stop once it had started. She was worried he'd try to 'calm her' again, but instead he squeezed her hand and murmured soft words in her ear. He let her cry until she was wrung out, and then he carried her to the bed.

Rain was falling outside.

Before putting her under the covers, he took off her robe. She was too tired to care. She expected him to take her as promised, but he simply laid beside her and cupped one of her breasts. His body warmed the cool bed.

Kylo kissed her shoulder. "I was too harsh yesterday. That is why Kira left—she could not take my firm discipline. I will… strive to be gentler."

"And Mrs. Heather?" Rey whispered. "Will she strike me when it suits her?"

"Strike you?"

His tone seemed genuinely shocked, which meant he probably did not condone the woman's behavior. Getting rid of Mrs. Heather would make escaping easier. Rey chewed the

inside of her cheek, making her mind up.

“Nothing… I’m sorry I brought it up. I’m sure her corrections were under your instruction.”

“What did she do?” he asked, his fingers playing with a nipple until it hardened under his touch.

“I said a word that wasn’t… acceptable, so she struck me. Then she grabbed my ear to further get my attention. I’m not used to physical punishment. She told me I would need all the corrections she had given Kira. I take it she used a strict hand with her as well?”

Kylo was silent. For a moment, the only sounds were the rain pattering against the glass window and the distant thunder.

Finally, he gathered her closer and nuzzled into her hair, breathing her in. “I am tired. Would you like to go to town tomorrow? You could pick out fabrics, maybe meet a woman your age. I have been told chocolate is in and I do enjoy a hot cup of it, sweet as it is.”

“I wonder what the town looks like,” Rey said with a yawn. “Could you show me?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding pleased.

“Kylo?”

“Hmm?”

“You really tried to take the ring off?”

He was quiet for a long second. “Yes. But I’ll admit, the relief I felt when it wouldn’t come off was immense.”

Rey sighed. “No more calming stuff—your doctor is a quack. I’m not hysterical.”

“But Dr. Snoke’s research…”

“Will be considered barbaric in my time.”

He mulled it over for a second. “Very well.”

“And no one in my time spanks their wife. Unless it’s… um… for fun.”

“Fun?” He sounded amused. “How does one correct their wife, then?”

“By not being an asshole,” she snapped. “You can talk to me like a decent human being.”

“I thought I was…” he grumbled. “I shall try. For you.”

“Thanks. Okay, well… goodnight.”

“Goodnight, my little wife.”

When Rey woke the next morning, Mrs. Heather had been dismissed.

Chapter 6

If she hadn't believed in time travel before, she did now.

The Jakku she knew was gone. In its place was a town that looked like it was part of a movie set, not real life. Rey and Kylo passed a feed shop, a blacksmith's forge, and an actual tavern with giant glass windows. A boy even offered to shine their shoes.

They spent most of their time in a shop that sold colorful ribbons and other *pretties* a woman might want. When they first entered the store, there were two other women who gave Rey a tight smile before rushing off. Rey had a strong feeling she'd been snubbed.

"I know their husbands," Kylo whispered to her. "I'll speak with them, and next time they will not be so unfriendly."

"I'd rather make natural friends than fake ones," Rey said, looking at a journal with soft leather binding. She flipped through to see the thick ivory-colored pages. "Is it because I stilted you at the altar?"

"No…" He took the journal and added it to their steadily-growing basket of items to buy. "They think themselves above you. You did not come from money or a…" He looked around and lowered his voice even more. "A respectable family. Don't pay them any mind. We will throw lavish parties and invite people who will put them to shame."

Rey frowned. She would be long gone by the time such a party was thrown—at least she hoped she would be. She made to look at a pair of fox skin mittens, but he pulled her back slightly.

"What is it? I can get you a dance tutor if you do not know how… and I'll import the finest clothes for you to wear."

"You can dress a pig in silks… not that I'm a pig." She sighed. "I don't think I can explain it, I'm sorry. Nevermind."

"Just a moment," Kylo said.

He approached the store clerk, paid their tab, and arranged to have all of Rey's items delivered to the estate. Then they headed back outside, where Kylo told their driver they were going to take a quick walk. He led her down a dusty street that, in two hundred years, would turn into a four-way highway with two Starbucks directly across from each other.

A man on the corner was selling hot peanuts and Kylo bought a small bag to share. She noticed other couples walking around too, some with female chaperones behind them. It was a strange sight. The women were dressed in tight fitting clothes that covered their arms and legs, but still accentuated their shape.

"You attended parties in your time?" Kylo asked as they strolled.

"Yes," Rey admitted. "But they were with wild college kids. What am I supposed to talk about with your friends? Bonnets and ribbons? Cows and chickens?"

Kylo raised an eyebrow. “I can see your point. Perhaps in a year or two. My mother knows everyone and she’ll introduce you to more suitable women who are not…”

“Snobs?” she finished for him.

He grinned. “Something like that… We should return home.”

“Please, just a little more exploring. I want to see everything!”

He pretended to be exasperated, but she could see the corners of his mouth turn up. “A country drive?”

She hadn’t expected him to suggest it so easily. “That would be lovely.”

His expression stayed the same, but she thought she saw something flicker behind his smile. Before she could examine it, he gave her his hand and helped her into the carriage. The inside was wide enough for both of them to have their space, the seats cushioned. Kylo gave instructions to the driver and soon they were heading outside the town.

She stared out the window and tried to picture how it was in her time, but couldn’t.

“Does it make you sad?” Kylo asked.

Rey shrugged noncommittally and shifted in her seat, once again trying to get comfortable in her new clothes. She could tell the silence irritated him, so she changed the subject. “These *clothes* make me sad. Do you think they really keep temptation and sinful thoughts at bay?” He opened his mouth to agree or disagree, but she waved him off before he could answer. “I’m going to take off a few layers if you don’t mind.”

She started at the collar and worked her way down. Kylo had glanced out the window once, but other than that, he seemed inclined to let her do what she wanted. After pulling her jacket off, she managed to unlace her stiff corset, wanting very badly to throw it outside and have the horse trample it.

“Are you going to take it *all* off?” he said hoarsely.

“What? No.” She held the corset up for him to see. “There’s a board in this. I thought underwire was bad, but like… how do women have all these layers and no underwear? That’s weird.”

“Would you like me to help?”

“No…” She decided that was the limit of what she could shed until she was home. “But I would rather be naked all day than wear this.”

He looked away and moved his hat into his lap. She didn’t have to be a genius to guess why. She didn’t want him touching her, but she needed to distract him. If she played her cards right, there was a chance she could go back to 2022 today.

“My husband…” She drew her skirt up, showing him her stockings.

“Kira–Rey,” he corrected. “We are outside our bedroom and—”

“No one will see me except you…” Rey slid her skirt even further up her legs until she revealed the ribbons that kept the stockings in place. “Free yourself and tell me what you

want."

She had her dress pulled up around her thighs now, giving him a slight glimpse of her center, knowing he'd like it better if she didn't look too wanton. She grinned when she saw that Kylo was all sorts of flustered; she loved how he was battling with his etiquette for her.

"Take your…" She tried to think of what to call it in Victorian times. "Take your manhood out. My lord." The words sounded comical, but she knew better than to laugh.

"You play a dangerous game, my love," he warned, but his fingers went to the buttons of his pants. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

She watched as he freed himself, and to reward him, she spread her legs a little wider. He groaned. Heat pooled in her stomach to see him so enamored with her.

"Stroke yourself," she said. "Tell me what you want to do to me."

He hesitated and then his large hand wrapped around his cock. He gave it a long stroke, thumb swirling around the precum beading at the tip. "I want you in nothing but those stockings, your belly swollen with our child. I have always needed you… like air… like water… such desire. My soul I cannot give to God, but to you. Would you damn me for it, sweet wife?"

The way his eyes took her in heightened her arousal. Which was silly, because what she needed was this carriage to take her as far as the road would go. She looked at his cock, and when she met his gaze again, she thought he knew.

"Touch yourself," he ordered. "I love the feel between your legs. The heat. I want to see your fingers where mine cannot be at present."

She told herself it was needed to keep the ride going along. Yet she was surprised to find how wet she was as she put her hand between her legs, her fingers sliding with ease.

"I want to do things to you no proper man should do," he confessed, his hand still stroking himself. "I want to bury my face between your legs and make you beg for every pleasure I give. I want to suck and nip your breasts until my mark is all over them. I even want you to sin, and put your lips where…" He couldn't say it aloud. "And make you taste me."

She had started this so he would forget to tell the driver to head home, but she was going to climax if she wasn't careful. Her fingers slowed and his expression darkened.

Kylo went to his knees, pushed her legs apart and kissed the inside of her thighs. "Maybe it is a sin, but I will risk Hell for this Heaven."

His mouth was between her legs and his arms wrapped around her thighs, drawing her to him. His tongue delved deep and she couldn't help but hold on to the walls of the carriage as he figured out rather quickly what to do. She should be repulsed, but his nose brushed her clit and she couldn't summon any words of protest. She didn't *want* him to stop.

Rey came with a loud cry, stifling the sound with a hand over her mouth, hoping the driver wouldn't know what they were doing. Kylo kissed above her clit and then moved from under her skirt. When he rose, he dragged her with him toward where he was sitting. She gave a weak protest as he positioned her over his lap, his cock ready to impale her.

But the carriage hit a bump so hard that she flew back toward her seat. He followed, lifting her skirt over her shoulders and pressing into her from behind.

“I think I like this better,” he said as he pushed inside.

The road was getting rougher, but she doubted he noticed as he started fucking her with little care for gentleness. The angle made him go deep and hit a spot that felt good. She bit her lip and knew that she was going to come again.

When she came for the second time, he groaned in her hair and muttered something about the way she fluttered around his cock. Then he proceeded to lose all control, as if some wild beast in him had been released. It deepened her climax until she was sure the driver had to know what they were doing; she could feel the violence of his thrusts in every fiber of her being. Still, it was better than gentle. This was carnal, instinctual. She could live with herself for enjoying it.

When he came, he pulled her close and pressed his face against her cheek. She felt him shudder with his pleasure, and the warmth of his seed as he once again made her worry about pregnancy.

She thought it was over, but instead of getting off of her, he tightened his grip. It cut through the fog of her own euphoria.

“I know what you plan, pretty wife. But you had best find a dagger for my heart, for I will never rest until you are back where you belong.” He chuckled darkly and a chill went down her spine. “Do you think me a fool? I know exactly why you wanted to travel down this road.”

Before she could protest, he had her up against the seat as his large hand swatted her ass.

“Lying bastard! You promised you wouldn’t hurt me,” Rey screamed.

He kissed her neck. “I believe you mentioned this was done for fun on occasion. I can only imagine during such times as these.” He gave her another swat, though not as hard. “Don’t worry… I’m not going to punish you, despite the fact that you sorely need it. I’m going to let you meet the crone.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see his eyes sparkle. “I don’t understand…”

“It’s the logical next step for you.” He pulled out of her and sat down as she readjusted her skirt. His seed leaked onto the inside of her thighs. “And you seem to want to distract me, as we travel so very far away.”

She blushed.

“At least you have the decency to look contrite. And I’ll admit… I have enjoyed the distraction.” She shot him a glare as he found his hat, putting it on. “Don’t be cross—it did us both good. And I’m going to let you talk to the old woman.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because,” Kylo said, looking out the window. “I know you’ll try to do this on your own. Probably break your neck stealing a horse. Better to get it over with now.”

“What if she says I can leave?”

He looked at her as if she should already know the answer. “Then I’ll follow you.”

“Seriously? Are you fucking crazy?” She snapped her mouth shut, afraid her outburst would make him turn the carriage around. As she waited for his anger, she pointedly stared at her fingers; specifically, the one with the charmed ring.

“I want your happiness,” Kylo said. She could hear the earnestness in his voice. “And I fear for you. The crone is not God… and black magic is terrible to use. If she can offer you hope, it will not be without a heavy price.”

She thought of him as a ghost stuck between worlds, maybe forever, and felt a touch of real fear. He saw it and nodded. “Good, you are not so foolish now. We are almost there. What were you planning to offer her? Surely you were not counting on goodwill.”

Rey grabbed her small handbag and pulled out five paper notes, each for a hundred dollars. Kylo’s eyes went wide. He looked at the money, then her, clearly trying to figure out how she had gotten such a sum.

“Five hundred dollars was in my purse when I crossed over.” She put the bills away. “I guess some of the magic got into it… I hope it will be enough.”

“You could live for a while on that,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “A servant’s pay for a lifetime. Keep it, love. I do not want you to bargain with anything. There are things I can offer… and if a soul is put in danger, let it be mine.”

She was oddly touched by the gesture. “Why are you helping me? I might leave you. And if you follow, you know my world will not be so kind to you.”

He didn’t answer right away, his eyes drifting to his ring. The trees became thinner and the land craggier. “I feel like this connection cannot be broken. Perhaps I am wrong. But I have gambled before and I’d rather do it on my own terms.”

She frowned and looked out the window.

“Let us promise each other something here and now,” he said. His face had lost all mirth. “If the crone says she cannot send you back, you will accept your place here, as my wife. If the crone says you can cross back over… I will not stop you as long as you allow me to follow.”

“And if you cannot…”

He looked out the window. “Then I shall be your ghost.”

The rest of the drive was spent in silence.

When they reached a place that was more rock than life, the carriage stopped. Kylo glanced out the window and then opened the door, exiting the carriage. She peered out and saw a man dressed in ill-fitting clothes with a black beard down to his stomach.

Kylo called out to him, but when the man spoke back it didn’t sound friendly.

“I need to talk to the wise woman,” Kylo called loudly.

“We don’t want you here,” the man snarled. “Be gone before we decide to make you gone.”

“I will leave. But would you hear my offer first?”

The man grunted, as much of a yes that they’d get.

“If you agree to bring her to me, tomorrow I will deliver you guns, livestock, and grain.”

The man’s flat gray eyes narrowed. He tried to peer at Rey in the carriage, but Kylo blocked the man’s path.

“Very well,” the man eventually said, spitting on the ground.

Two more men arrived from behind rocks. Rey saw Kylo’s shoulders tense, and knew he was worried. He half-turned toward the carriage, but looked up at the driver. She thought he meant to tell the driver to take off without him.

“Get Mara,” the gray-eyed man ordered the other two men. “Tell her the cursed man is back.”

Kylo didn’t relax, but he didn’t order the driver to speed away either. Rey tried to tell herself she didn’t care what happened to him, but worry coiled in her gut. She wanted him to get back in the carriage and back to safety.

She had no watch, but when the men finally returned, it felt like an hour had passed. Kylo’s stiff posture never changed. Only the wind ruffling his hair made him look alive. A group of men approached, not one of them looking friendly. Had she really thought to come out here alone?

Kylo’s expression was unreadable, but Rey felt it in her bones that he was going to tell the driver to ride off. Suddenly, the old woman made herself known behind the men. She was small, barely five feet tall, and wearing a gray shawl. Her white hair twirled around her face. She was the oldest looking woman Rey had ever seen.

Rey opened the carriage door.

“Stay put,” Kylo commanded.

She left the carriage anyway; this was her only chance to go home. Kylo was furious, but when she sidled up next to him, he put his arm around her protectively.

In a low voice, he said, “You are stubborn… I should—”

“Stop being a control freak,” Rey hissed back. “If they were going to kill us they wouldn’t have brought her.”

She thought she could hear his teeth grinding as he bit back a retort.

When the old woman was close, she shooed the men away from her. Rey tried to keep her fear from showing, but the woman didn’t look natural. She had skeletal arms and long nails with jeweled fingers.

“You have your bride.” The old woman gestured at Rey. “Why do you come here?”

Rey spoke before Kylo could. “I don’t belong here. I want to go home. When you cursed him, you cursed me as well, and… you have to send me back to my own time. Please.”

The men behind the woman stared at Rey blankly, but the old woman looked troubled. Her hand touched a silver necklace that hung around her neck.

“What my wife means—” Kylo started, but the old woman cut him off with a sharp gesture.

“I know what she said. Come here, child. Let me see you.”

Kylo’s hand around her waist became vice-like.

“No one will harm her,” the crone said. “You have my word.”

Rey noticed she hadn’t included him in that promise, but he reluctantly let her go. She could feel his eyes on her as she walked toward the old woman. The only sound was her feet crunching on the gravel and the horse neighing softly.

“What is your name, child?”

“Rey Johnson,” Rey said. “I’m from two hundred years in the future.”

The woman frowned. “Let me see your palm.”

Rey showed her hand and the woman took it, her bony finger tracing a line. “Such a short life line. But…” Her brow furrowed. “Here is another life line….forked for children.”

She spat in Rey’s hand, making her recoil, but the woman held onto her tightly and peered at *something* in the distance—God only knows what. After a few moments, the crone released her hand and glanced between Rey and Kylo.

“You cannot return,” she said.

“Please…” Rey fell to her knees. “I’m begging you. Give me back my life.”

“I cannot. Your previous life is over and I cannot give that back,” the woman said, sadly but firmly. “Your palm says as much. The day Kylo found you, you were slated to die; how, I do not know, but my sight says violence.”

Rey remembered Alex, her expression shifting to horror. Kylo was suddenly behind her, helping her stand up.

“I believe he is dead. I hit him too hard in my anger, and he didn’t move.”

The old woman gave a derivative snort. “So the blood price was paid. For a cursed man, you seem to have an uncanny amount of luck. A good eye is on you.”

Rey felt sick. “So… that’s it, then? I’m stuck? Forgive me for not being grateful, but am I to live forever in a world I don’t belong in?”

The woman uttered something in another language. Rey thought it was a curse. “Be grateful. It is rare when fate allows a person to escape death. I see a long life for you. Children. Four boys and one girl. You already carry your daughter.”

Rey's fingers spanned her belly as if she could feel the life within. Kylo's hand covered her own, reminding her that he too would be there, and she felt a cold rage creep up on her. She could survive in this world, but to watch her daughter grow up and be treated as subservient…

"Could our daughter…" Kylo spoke quietly. 'When she is of age, could she go to this world where a woman can be president?' He withdrew from his pocket a silver key. "This seemed to connect the worlds when I was a ghost."

The woman refused to touch the key, but waved her hand over it. "A talisman…" she said in disbelief. Something close to a smile ghosted her lips as she gave a shrug. "Your wife cannot go through, nor can you as you have bound yourself to her. But perhaps on a full moon, on Hallow's night, your daughter might."

Kylo turned Rey in his arms. She wanted to hate him. She wanted to push him away. But when he pulled her into an embrace, she clung to him. "It's not fair," was all she managed to choke out.

"I know. But maybe, for her, it will be."

Rey looked up at him. "Do you promise?"

"If it makes you happy… but I'm afraid it will break my heart again." He kissed her cheek. "For any daughter of ours will be most precious to me."

Rey looked at the old woman. "Mara, that's your name. You and your family are welcome at our home."

The old woman scoffed. "The house of a cursed man. Crossing the threshold *once* was bad enough. But perhaps…" She seemed to reconsider. "You may call for me when it is time for the baby, and I will come. In return, you will take on my granddaughters so they learn to read and write."

"I will make sure they are well educated," Kylo promised.

"I did not ask for *your* promise," the woman said. "She knows what I want. Education, not being some wash girl scrubbing floors on her knees for you."

"I'll make sure," Rey promised, before Kylo could stick his foot in his mouth again.

When it was time to leave, Rey held onto Kylo's arm, feeling as if she was leaving a funeral. There was no going home for her. Even with the knowledge that this was some cosmic second chance, she hadn't yet felt like it was a blessing.

Kylo sat next to her in the carriage so that she could rest against him. As they traveled back home, he stroked her hair in comfortable silence.

Marriage, and now a child? A family seemed like a foreign concept to Rey. There had never been a mom and dad in her life. Even her career choice had been its own escape; acting had felt like a place where she could immerse herself into scripts and become someone else. Someone who had a life, love, and story that mattered.

Kylo would be her story now. Her family. The thought worried her, but it was also somewhat comforting. A weird sort of flutter in her chest made her queasy. She wasn't sure

she liked him yet… but maybe one day. He seemed to have mellowed out, but that could change. She cleared her throat.

"If I love you someday, it will only be because you treated me as your equal, and with kindness," she said, feeling him hold his breath at her words. "And if I am to start loving you, you must never take it for granted. I am not a thing or a possession. You'll be lucky if I stay at all. And you must *always* ask my permission. And I can say no. And I can sleep alone. And…"

He lifted her chin up so she met his gaze. He was looking at her strangely. "And…?"

"I can always be me."

"Those are a lot of *and's,"* he said simply. "But you have my devotion. And if the crone is right, you have our child too. I wish to see you content. Worry not, sweet wife. You will find me agreeable."

Rey leaned her head on his shoulder as the carriage took them home.